**A Silent Prayer**

**by Tracy Geddes**

Back and fore. Back and fore. Scorch marks startin on the carpet as I scootit back an fore fae the windae. Up and doon fae the sofa. Anxiety buildin, and buildin. Hans to my face, my hair, my stomach. Back to the windae. No, nae yet, nae sign yet.

Tryin, of course, to pit on a brave face. A happy face. A happy, an in control, Mam. A fully functioning, life’s a breeze, Mam. As my 10-month old baby dother clatters ower, in her yalla plastic baby walker, bump, into my legs. She sits right back in the cushioned seat, throws her chubby shooders back and gazes mischievously up at me, a twinkle in her blue een. I look doon, keepin my face straight, roll my een dramatically an, wi a great enlongated sigh, I bend doon to her.

‘Fit?’ I snap. She bursts into giggles. Tears o laughter spring into her een.

‘Fit, fit, fit, fit, fit, fit, fit-fit’ I continue, bendin doon an liftin up her tiny little body, convulsed wi chucklin. Dancin roon the room. Pingu playin, on video, in the backgrun. Great fun and merriment. We shimmy ower to the other windae which overlooks the hairber and the beach. I see reflections o soarin scurries in her clear and curious een.

Hearin voices doon ablow, I quickly glance at the clock. It’s 3:15pm. Baby stiffens wi excitement, pointin doon at the foot o the concrete stairs. We’re three fleers up. She turns her chubby face to mine, sayin, or tryin ti say

‘Anyuw an Tefty’

The brither and sister fae 2 doors awa. They spint maist o their time wi us, playin wi the baby, or the dog. Them jist hame fae school widnae hiv pleased their mam. Nor neen o the reprobates that filled her hoose. Their mam jist liked the drugs. Bairns usually jist putten straight back oot, nae changed, nae supper and nae money.

I’m still anxious. I’m sick o this. I’m deein nithin wrang. I should jist be able ti enjoy playin wi ny baby. I should be free, free to tak her oot, her an the ither twa bairns, to play and hae fun, and run in the sun, an splash in the sea. Bit if we’re nae in, fan he comes hame, well.

Baby starts to get a bitty restless. She’s ready to get teen oot to play, an looks at me intensely. I ken fit she’s gan awa ti say afore she says it.

‘Anyuw an Tefty?’

Oh me. There’s a poundin in my lugs. I scoot back to the ither windae. Still nithin. I whisk baby into the kitchen. It’s spotless and there’s one portion o mince and tatties on the hob. I’d spread the tatties ower the base o the pot, to gie the impression there wis mair than there actually is. Thank god for the butcher fa sells a quarter pun o mince for 50p. I only had £1. Then 33p for the cheapest crap o dog food. Kent baby wis sorted, she’d baby mush and yoghurts. Bit she’d had a yoghurt for dinner, an she’s 10 months noo. She’s needin better mait than ess. I look at her. She’s gazin ower at the cooker. I really hiv to fight to stop the fury risin.

I canna help ess. I have nae money. I could ask him. Him thit says ony bairns spawned by him should be provided for by benefits folk or grandparents. But I wid raither cut aff my airm than ever be beholdin ti him. Ever. Widnae gie him the satisfaction, or ammunition, as he wid see it.

I kiss my beautiful baby and tak her back to my observation point. She’s lickin her lips an swallayin. I sigh with despair as I bend doon, on the wye past the coffee table, and collect her Anyway Up cup, containing her juice. As she grabs it wi her ain tiny hand, she pauses and says

‘San-coo’

Afore gulpingit doon. Christ, I could weep. This outstandingly perfect, bright, intelligent little girl deserves so much better than a Father like him. I stretch to peer back oot the windae fan there’s a noise. The familiar, dreaded, drunken clattering of keys, repeatedly aiming, and missing the keyhole.

My stomach lurches, right doon to my knees. I feel a bit sick and can feel mysel startin ti shak. I grip my baby tightly and try to feign confidence. My throat feels dry an tight, like his cold hand is already tightening aroon it, so I squeak ‘Here’s your Dad.’

The baby looks roon. She can say ‘Dad’ but disnae. She says nithin. The key’s in, being turned, and the front door creaks open. A thud, and a clatter and the door slams. A low, angry muttering starts up.

We’re jist stannin there. I’m fightin the risin panic. A ray o golden sunshine beams in from the West facing windae, bathing my baby in a light so pure. I feel so sorry for her. He must be really drunk, he’s takken a lang time. The baby turns to me sayin

‘Dad?’

There’s nae joy in her voice. I’m sure she swallayed afore she asked. I stiffen up, black dread coursing through my veins.

The living room door flies open. He crashes in. Heid doon, shooder bashin aff the wa. He taks a few slow, unsteady steps, comin ti a swayin halt jist in front o me an my baby. He lifts his heid an looks at us. He emits a pungent smell o leather, lager an stale fag rick. His een are wild an bloodshot. He’s gone, beyond all reason. He plasters on an insane drunken sneer, an snarls

‘Fars my baby?’

I grip the baby to me. Fae the minute she wis born I swore I wid protect her. He can abuse me all he wants but he’s nae gan to hurt one silver strand o her silken hair. ‘She’s here, she’s fine,’ I stammer.

He gives a derisory snort, then drunkenly lunges forward, ripping the baby oot of my airms. Swayin aroon, cuddling her. Her hair gettin weet fae the sweat runnin doon his face. The drugs. The toxins. I’m repulsed, and will be washing her hair asap. He collapses onto the sofa, half lyin, half tryin, an failin, to hud the baby up. He’s dronin awa to her, grippin her tiny airms an legs, wi his tattooed fingers.

I’m on red alert. Duncin roon them. I must bide my time. Ess could ging affa, affa wrang. Baby starts to squirm an peek.

‘Shh, sleeeeepy, sleeeepy,’ slurs her drunken father. Her hoody has risen up an the hood has bunched up against her face. I lean in, an try to pull it doon into place. She braks her airms free an goes to hud them up to me. He pulls her airms back doon, slaps my hans awa and fichers, tryin to fix her hood himsel. I retain my leanin in position. I’m inches awa, huddin my breath. Dare I jist snatch her up? He senses my hovering, an pulls her in closer to him. She girns again an struggles.

I’m straight in ess time. I wheep her up. ‘Oh, jist like a jumpin bean ess een.’ I force oot a laugh and plop the bewildered baby back into her baby walker. Safe and sound for noo.

The drunk then snarls that he wants his supper brocht to him anoo. God help me if I hidnae ony supper for him. I hurry and obey. Nae question. He’s been oot for days, drink and drugs, nae sleep. A hot meal and he’ll be oot cold for hours. Peace.

Oh no he’s on the move. I’m scrapin the mince and tatties onto a plate, to microwave for him. He’s comin up ahen me. I fight to stop mysel shakkin. I can feel his damp, drunken breath basting the back o my neck. I’m twitchy, flighty. I want to jist drap the plate and run like hell. I wid if I didnae hae a baby in the next room. He slides his han up the back o my t-shirt. Ooh, get back serpent. I wish I wis like a magician’s assistant, I wid jist Pfft! - disappear, an he’d be left wi nithin bit a spinnin plate. He’s leaning on my shooder, breathin toxic filth. I pick up the plate an peel mysel oot fae underneath him.

That’s fan he notices there’s only one plate. He disnae even ask. At’s reason enough. And as I place the plate inti the microwave and press the start button, he roars,

‘O aye. Jist lookin efter yirsel again, as usual?’

He strides ower to me and grips me by the throat, draggin me ower to a full-length cupboard, slammin me up against the door. He’s rantin an ravin. I feel like a sparra, in the jaws o a cat. I try to spik, or swalla, but I canna. I’m squirmin, glancin ben the living room, I’m at least relieved ti see my baby, in her walker, drinkin her juice, watchin Pingu.

He lets go and I drap ti the fleer. I’m upright again in an instant. The fleer is a vulnerable place to be fan you’re dealin with a still standin madman fa is intent on causin you hairm. He pushes me ower to the microwave, jist as it tings the meal’s ready. He’s tellin me, in nae uncertain terms, fit a worthless, complete an utter waste o space I am. I sigh. There’s nae point. This is fit he wunts. An argument. For me to push him back. I ken. It’s laughable. I pull oot the hait plate an lay it doon. ‘This is for you. I had mine earlier,’ I lie. It’s pathetic and I hate mysel for it. I step back an stare at the fleer. Remindin me again fit a stain on society I am, he snatches up the plate, covers it in broon sass, staggers back ben the hoose, lurchin past the baby, throwin himsel on the sofa, an starts shovellin the food doon his throat.

I bide in the kitchen. I light masel a fag. I’m tryin ti gie this up, for her sake. But needs bloody must. I inhale deeply, blowing oot the smoke. I need to wait till he is asleep afore I can think properly. Fan the danger is removed. My neck is sair far he gripped me. Suppose I should coont mysel lucky it wisnae anither black eye, or a split lip. My shooder aches.

Jist then there’s a quiet chap at the door. I glance at the clock. Twenty to four. I ken fa ess will be. Pingu still blarin oot ben the hoose. I dart ower an open the door a crack. It’s the brither an sister fae twa doors doon. Standin there in their school uniforms. The sister is weerin her mam’s platform shoes. Their gaunt, hollow faces. They look at me expectantly. I feel terrible. I canna let baby see them. I shak my heid at them. Disappointment springs into their 5 and 6 year-aul een. I’m so torn. I want nithin mair than to tak my baby, an them, awa oot to the beach or the rocks. They dinna move. I sigh. ‘Later’ I tell them. Smiles start to spread ower their little faces and they melt awa. They understand.

Back through to the living room. Baby noo back on the sofa, in the airms o her Father, bein squeezed into his leather jacket. He’s croonin awa softly to her. As I stealthily approach, his een start to close. My baby is dripping in sweat. I try to lift his airm, to pull her free. She’s in real danger of suffocation here. He wakes up, grips her tightly again, an releases a fresh, foul mouthed barrage o abuse at me. I’m ess, an at, and a proper een o thon.

He then slurs, ‘You can leave if you want, but ye’re nae takkin my baby.’

He lies back doon, pullin the strugglin, sweatin, overheatin baby back into his leather jacket. He pulls it ower her heid, and fas back, snorin. Out cold. I’m terrified my baby is gan to hae a fit. I gently, gently, shift the jacket aff her face. She’s bright reed. His snorin is gettin louder. I move his airm and release my baby, scooping her up and carryin her awa. Pullin aff her hoody and gettin a cal cloot for her face. She’s dazed an confused. I lie her doon, wi her shawl, to change her nappy. It’s bursten wi the amount of juice. I undress her doon to her vest. She is soaked in sweat. She lies there silently, cooling doon. I look roon at him. Comatose. I feel nithing bit pure, unadulterated hatred.

Efter a this drama, I lie baby doon in her pram for a wee nap. I go through to the kitchen, makin mysel tea, for shock, an mak up her bedtime bottle. do a bit of laundry, listening for baby. I hear the bairns fae two doors awa playing on the concrete steps. I’ve clyes to pit oot so I nip an hing them oot on the tow. Fan I come back in, baby’s still dozin. Clock says 4pm. I widnae normally pit her doon for a sleep at this time.

I go over an check on him. I really hope he’ll choke on his ain vomit one day. Deefenin snores. His mouth is wide open, white an crusty at baith sides. Rivers of sweat runnin doon his face an neck. Stannin so close, a new smell drifts under my nostrils. I recoil. Canna be. Sniff again. It sure is. I check his midriff, an his ripped, filthy jeans. I see a speading dark patch. I’m beyond disgusted, fuming. Ess is the sofa my baby sits on. I throw myself back in the airmchair. I’m jist speechless. Ess is a new depth o depravity. Jist hoo much div I hiv ti tak? Baby stirs. I glance ower. I ken once she’s richt wakkened, she’s gan to be one hungry baby. God, if I could hae jist one wish. I shut my een an say a silent prayer. Lord, feed the hungry bairns.

The drunk snorts, an rolls onto his side. Anither ray o aifterneen sunshine streams in fae the West, lighting up the drunk an revealin that, fan he’d rolled, the contents o his pooch hid fell oot onto the sofa, and fleer. I lean over an look. Bathed in golden light, four, or five £20 notes, scrunched up, an soaked in urine, lying on the fleer. Mair on his leg an the sofa aside him.

The baby stirs again. I’m sitting staring at the money on the floor. I silently slide ower on my knees. It’s tense, oh so tense. If she wakes, and howls, she’ll wake him. There’s so much money here. Suddenly my baby sits bolt upright in her pram. She’s rubbin her face wi her shawl. I snatch two of the damp, scrunched up £20 notes, an stuff them into my back pooch. I go over an lift my baby, shoudin her. My mind is furlin. He winna ken. He’ll jist think he’s spent it, state he’s in. Ooh, I dinna ken. Stealin is stealin. I’ll be deid if he finds oot. My baby starts makin hungry, smackin soons wi her lips.

At’s it. Quickly I mak up my mind. He’s gan to pay for fit he’s deen the day. Baith to me and my dother. Ying an yang, an a that. I pull on the baby’s pink fluffy jacket and quickly bundle her back into her pram, aff the brake, wheelin her oot the front door, doon the 2 flights o concrete steps. I’m haulin on my ain jacket, fastening it up. We get to the bottom o the stairs. The bairns greet the baby excitedly and she’s beaming at them. The £40 in my back pocket wis screaming oot:

‘I’m £40 and she has stolen ess money, and abody must ken that she is a thief and steals money cos she has stolen £40 and it’s in her pooch cos she’s a brazen, dirty thief.’

The three hungry faces are lookin up at me. My hairt’s racin, an poundin in my lugs. I’ll jist deny athing. Pure as the driven sna, me. I smile doon at the bairns.

‘Fa wants to ging to the Wimpy?’ I say.